Defining: What is “Sense of Place”? 

A sense of place can be thought of as a person’s perception of his or her relationship with a specific place. As explained above, interactions that contribute to the development of this relationship do not necessarily occur directly between person and place; they can take the form of interactions between two or more people in a place. The more positive interactions a person has in a particular place, the stronger a connection the person will feel to that place. Meanwhile, the more negative interactions a person has in a particular place, the more he or she will try to distance himself or herself from that place. Sense of place is a fluid concept that changes as a person collects new experiences over time.

Sense of Place as a Relationship

To understand the concept of sense of place fully, we must conceive of place as more than a physical location. People remember places as backdrops for experiences, not as places in and of themselves. So while geographic context provides a basis for an understanding of place, the experiences that contribute human significance to that setting are the key part of the definition. When people think back on a place, they recall events that occurred, relationships that formed, and sensory experiences. People experience places to which they have never traveled through the lens of another person’s experience. The primary way to communicate the spirit of a place is to convey human experience that involves that place, or a perception of it. Place is remembered as the experience of being in a place rather than as an empty landscape. This holistic definition of place is the foundation for understanding sense of place.

Rethinking Place

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If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.”
-Wendell Berry

Creating: Expressions of Sense of Place

“Now I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it.”
-Wallace Stegner

Visual Art

Local artist Matt Russ on how painting in the Belgrades has contributed to his sense of place:

“...my interpretation of the Belgrade Lakes region, particularly the Kennebec Highlands, has grown in geographical area and personal significance over the years. The more I discover about the landscape, the more I seem to discover about myself. I search for treasures in the form of images but invariably come away with more. I have an undying respect for the place and its transforming power.”

Figure 3: Photo of Uncle Alfred Williams in front of the Axtell Schoolhouse
Anna Jones-Bailey, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 36 in.

Seasonal Changes

Summer activities have been the lifeblood of the Belgrades for almost two centuries. Because of this seasonal dynamic, there is a community of people who not only experience the Belgrades for one out of four seasons. While they cannot know the place as intimately as people who experience the region in a multi-seasonal way, they can still value the character of the place and the opportunities it presents. Anyone who appreciates the Belgrades’ natural resources and ambiance is a stakeholder because he or she would feel a sense of personal loss if the beauty and health of the lakes were degraded.

Sharing: Stakeholder in the Belgrades

The Penney family has lived in the Belgrade region since 1979. The place is part of their memory and identity. Even members of the family who led adult lives away from their physical origins had deep roots in the area. For example, Uncle Alfred Williams, a relation of the Penney family, returned to the family property at the age of eighty-six and requested to have his picture taken next to the Axtell schoolhouse, which he attended as a young boy (see picture at left). People with such a strong connection to place are stakeholders by virtue of how much of their personal identity they owe to their environments.

Literature

Literature also serves as a means of expressing sense of place. A Place Called Maine and Maine Voices are both collections of essays by Mainers—some sense of the world—about their relationships with Maine places. The range of the demographics represented in these volumes is impressive. Everyone from six-year-old, homeschooled Katherine Mawhinney to Pulitzer prize winner E.B. White has something to say about an experience with a Maine place. Although the writers begin by describing places in the conventional sense of the word, they often end up examining the relationships and senses of place in their lives.

Local Organizations

Local organizations, such as the Belgrade Regional Conservation Alliance, the Belgrade Lakes Association, the East Pond Association, the McGrath Pond/Salmon Lake Association, the North Pond Association, and the Snow Pond/Messalonskie Lake Association are taking action to promote a sense of caring with regard to the lakes. Members of these organizations are citizens of the lakes and take the initiative to share their knowledge, experiences, appreciation, and deep connection to place. They are stakeholders because they care enough about their mental and physical places to share them actively in an appropriate manner.

But my instinct tells me that the happier and more satisfied people feel in their places, the better they treat outsiders; and the more resourceful people are in their lives, the less aggravated they’re made by strangers. And the more manifestly wonderful a place is—like Maine—the more its natives are willing to share (within limits) their appreciation of it with like-minded people from away.”
-Richard Ford, “I’m New Here,” A Place Called Maine